

# Orts: The George MacDonald Society Newsletter

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Volume 42

Article 1

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1997

## Orts 42, 1997

The George MacDonald Society

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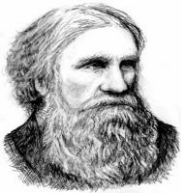
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### Recommended Citation

The George MacDonald Society (1997) "Orts 42, 1997," *Orts: The George MacDonald Society Newsletter*: Vol. 42, Article 1.  
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# Orts

## The George MacDonald Society Newsletter No. 42, Spring 1997.

APOLOGY: We regret the late appearance of this issue, but our editor Tim Braithwaite has been unexpectedly delayed in the Far East on business.

### THE GALES OF CHANGE

The extent to which email and the internet, in the past year, have supplanted the traditional forms of communication at a distance, is almost beyond belief. Few of us had realised how our specialist interests can blossom when a form of world-wide communication becomes available which reproduces the situation in a neighbourhood special-interest club, where members communicate informally with one another several times a week. The MacDonald Society's web site has not yet started to flourish, but that is only because J. J. Flynn who manages it, has been seriously ill. We wish him a speedy recovery. There is, however a flourishing web site plus a daily MacDonald email bulletin **several pages long**, established by our member Mike Partridge and described elsewhere in this issue. This has already some thirty or more **active** members, world-wide, who contribute comments on the matters currently under discussion and can read the responses the next day. By contrast, a person contributing a comment to Orts has to wait at least three months for a response from anyone other than the editor. We had not realised how constraining and unnatural this traditional method is. The internet and email, used sensibly, is no more expensive than television, and of vastly more practical use. It has obvious perils, of course. Like television and the motor car, more than 90% of its use by private individuals will undoubtedly be as a worthless but dangerous toy. However people who value MacDonald's understanding of the human being should be better able than most to avoid this pitfall. Specialist newsletters, like Orts, are important until the internet is widely used, but it is not easy to envisage a positive function for them after that time.

Another, quite different, gale of change is blowing through Britain at present, following the recent parliamentary elections. It likewise is affecting many aspects of life. Even the national cricket team, which has performed appallingly for some years, has won three international games in succession in one week against its main rivals, Australia! These are the modern one-day games, which are very different from the traditional five-day test-matches, but the latter continue alongside them. This is an apt paradigm for the state of the nation since Tony Blair became Prime Minister. Blair holds traditional Christian Socialist beliefs, but concurrently is very much a man of the modern world. In the last century, F.D. Maurice's Christian Socialism was the spearhead of the war against materialism. Maurice helped the group of writers who gathered around him—MacDonald, Kingsley, Ruskin, Carroll and others—to an understanding of the relationship of man to God which enabled them to combine exceptional imaginative powers with

practical social concern. Today's new problems pose new challenges. But these problems will not be effectively tackled unless Blair's new vision is integrated with his understanding of Maurice's impulse. And at present the two seem to coexist independently, contributing little to each other. The new government's educational plans, for example, seem to perpetuate all the materialist dogmas of recent decades and to be far removed from MacDonald's recognition of the deeper aims which must underlie educational policy if we are to remain human beings and not evolve into mere automata.

MacDonald's writings are useless if they do not help us live in the modern world. But they are worse than useless when they are perceived as providing rules to live by which excuse us from responding afresh out of love to every new situation. They are equally pernicious when the 'secondary worlds' which MacDonald creates for our solace and spiritual renewal are used-in the way many people are said to use soap operas—as hiding—places sealed off from everyday reality. If we find we are supplementing our reading of MacDonald with superficially similar but wholly escapist material, then we are indeed on this slippery slope. The name *Orts* was chosen for the MacDonald newsletter to emphasise that-unlike a conventional fanzine-it is not intended as a collection of sugary tit-bits lacking real nourishment. MacDonald's range of thought was as wide as Shakespeare's. It is not sufficiently appreciated, even by the majority of his own characters, that he could approach any human situation with utter frankness and sparkling humour. In *Adela Cathcart*, for example, the joyous and hilarious tales that are the main features of the heroine's cure are not appreciated by the tellers of the more sober tales (which also are crucial to her cure); and the 'conventional Christian', Mrs Cathcart, condemns the joyous approach outright. Hopefully *Orts* can reflect something of MacDonald's lightness of touch.

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### **ALL MACDONALD'S BOOKS ARE NOW IN PRINT AGAIN!**

It is impossible to over-estimate the achievement of the Johannesen family in completing the publishing and printing of all MacDonald's works, without any deviation from their original schedule! They are neither a conventional commercial publishing house; nor a publishing trust, relying upon funding from an outside body; nor wealthy eccentrics indulging a private whim. They are an ordinary family with no previous experience of either publishing or printing. They perceived a need, and in responding to this need found a way to serve the Truth.

The great malaise of this century has been the sensation, as W.B. Yeats expressed it, that: 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.' In a technological civilisation, largely dependent upon complex machines, beset all around by what Ivan Illich termed the 'disabling professions' who assure us that only they can organise our lives, the individual can feel utterly powerless. E.F. Schumacher, with his philosophy of Small is Beautiful, set out to show that this is not in fact the case, and that with appropriate intermediate technology the individual can achieve miracles. The Johannesen's achievement illustrates the truth of his thesis.

What is most significant about their achievement is its achievement: 'For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world.' That these forces could not even delay the project is grounds for rejoicing indeed!

This is surely due, in no small measure, to the integrity of the edition: the fitness for their purpose of these volumes. They are not heavy ostentatious books designed for library shelves, but inexpensive, neat and strong volumes for reading over and over again. And they are available from any good bookseller.

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## FUTURE EVENTS

The A.G.M. of the Society will be in London on October 10th. Further details will be given later. Our member Maria Kuteeva has organised a one-day conference on **The Ways of Creative Mythologies**, to be held at Manchester University on June 21st, MacDonald will be among the authors examined. The email address for enquiries is [mfinex4mk@fs1.art.man.ac.uk](mailto:mfinex4mk@fs1.art.man.ac.uk).

The International Research Society for Children's Literature was mentioned in the last *Orts*. This year their Biennial Congress is in Britain, at York University from August 22nd-26th, with the theme **The Past in the Present: Re-interpreting History in Children's Literature**. This may not seem very relevant to MacDonald, but one of the sub-themes is **Myth and Myth-making in Children's Literature**. The cost is £180 for visitors, yet £100 extra for contributors! Full information will be available soon and relevant details will be abstracted and published in the next *Orts*. The 1999 Congress will be at Calgary, hosted by our member Rod McGillis.

A major event in 1998 will be a 3-day conference at Westminster College, Oxford, from June 26th-28th on **MacDonald and Chesterton**. This is under the auspices of the Centre for Faith and Culture at Westminster College and the Chesterton Institute, publishers of the Chesterton Review. The themes will be drawn from the insights expressed in Chesterton's introduction to Greville MacDonald's biography of his father. The conference will be open to the public and could make an interesting focus for anyone planning a summer trip to Britain. The Centre For Faith and Culture is a Catholic research centre within an old-established Methodist college where the current Director is an Anglican—a situation which would have pleased MacDonald! Full details will be published in *Orts* when they become available.

Richard Hill is organising a colloquium on **C. S Lewis and Friends** at Taylor University, Uplands, Indiana, for November 14th-15th 1997. For details fax him on (317) 998 0636.

Our member David Neuhauser is holding a three session seminar on **George MacDonald** at the Cornerstone Festival July 2nd-6th.

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## NEW PUBLICATIONS

We continue to experience difficulties finding out about new publications which allude to MacDonald, and we are *always* grateful to learn of any new published work, and of any student undertaking a research project on MacDonald. The following list is probably far from complete.

## Books

Cambridge UP have fairly recently brought out *Muscular Christianity*. This presumably deals with the group around F.D. Maurice and could be very important. If so it will be reviewed in *North Wind*. Apparently some twenty pages are devoted exclusively to MacDonald.

MacDonald is one of the three authors whom John Goldthwaite singles out for highest praise as true servants of the Sophia (the 'Wisdom' of Ecclesiastes) in *The Natural History of Make-Believe*, Oxford UP, 1996. The other two are Kingsley and Collodi. This is an extraordinarily uneven book. Very little of the content is mediocre, although much is long—winded. There are frequent penetrating insights into the ideas of most of the writers studied, but careless mistakes are equally abundant. Despite Goldthwaite's admiration for MacDonald he begins by dismissing *Phantastes* as unreadable, and by maintaining that most of MacDonald's works 'have long since been forgotten, as their titles—*The Maiden's Bequest*, *The Minister's Restoration*, *The Curate's Awakening*—suggest they might.' This comment, appearing in a work published by one of the highest-regarded presses in the world, cannot but do serious harm to MacDonald's reputation, and it illustrates the utter irresponsibility of marketing these re-writes as works by MacDonald. Our member Rolland Hein has now completed the task of editing MacDonald's intermediate drafts of *Lilith*, and they are currently (May) being printed in two volumes by Johannesen. They are fascinating in their own right and an enormous help towards a real understanding of the final version.

## anthologies

Two contrasting MacDonald anthologies were published last winter. MacDonald is such a master of the aphorism that he is a favourite subject for anthologists. But they have varied considerably in their ability (or willingness?) to choose passages which can be detached from their context without becoming too misleading. Also, it is all too easy for the anthologist to assume that short passages which he finds very powerful are going to have a similar effect upon other people—in many cases they will not! Our member Harry Verploegh's selection *3000 Quotations From the Writings of George MacDonald*, Fleming Revell/Paternoster, 1996 seems wide-ranging and well-balanced. It includes very many quotations which I find highly inspiring, but I cannot judge whether they would also inspire other people. It is noteworthy that he modestly refrains from making any comment whatsoever upon his selection, and even the short Preface and Introduction provided by other people comment only very briefly upon the anthology itself.

Michael Phillips has worked tirelessly for many years to bring MacDonald to as wide a spectrum of people as possible, and his publications range from reprints of critical academic studies of MacDonald to very simple anthologies. *His Wisdom to Live By*, previewed in *Orts* 39, certainly comes into the latter category as the average length of the 214 quotations is under 50 words! We can trust his judgement, based upon his uniquely wide experience, that such a work will fulfill a worthwhile purpose. What, however, gives cause for disquiet is that this is in part a second-generation anthology: i.e. some of it is compiled from re-writes of MacDonald. One can reasonably say that when an author's work is re-written the potential for misunderstanding is raised by a whole degree of magnitude, and by another degree of magnitude when taken out of

context. Thus there is something like one hundred times more likelihood of misunderstanding of MacDonald's meaning when we read a very brief extract from a re-write than when we read the passage in context in the original work. In many cases this likelihood will still be very low, but the risk should not be incurred.

### **journals and papers**

Only two papers have been received since the last issue. Both are of high quality and both are studies of *Phantastes*. They are written from diametrically opposed viewpoints, yet their approach and conclusions have much in common. Adrian Gunther's "The Multiple Realms of George MacDonald's *Phantastes*", *Studies in Scottish Literature* 29, pp.174-190, explores MacDonald's conception of reincarnation and karma. William Gray's "George MacDonald, Julia Kristeva, and the Black Sun", *Studies in English Literature* 36, pp 877-893, explores the similarities between MacDonald's imagery and that of the Freudian, Julia Kristeva. But to state this does not indicate the breadth of these papers. Both reflect the extremely encouraging recent trend towards a far more imaginative and intuitive approach in literary criticism which is also evident in Goldthwaite's book. The approach demands considerable courage, since some intuitions will almost certainly be erroneous. But this very fact ought to encourage more thorough preliminary research. (The humanity of this new approach is in striking contrast to the in some ways comparable situation when anti-human/anti-Christian sociological theories began to infiltrate European culture in the last century, with consequences brilliantly documented and illustrated in Bram Dijkstra's *Idols of Perversity*.) It is difficult to over-emphasise the importance of this new approach, because previously the trend had been towards minute exploration of just one or two superficial details of whatever subject was under consideration. This was apparently the consequence of a system where promotion prospects for academics are more influenced by the number than by the quality of the papers they publish. It seems likely that the ease of communication offered by email and the internet has encouraged the new approach. It is natural that MacDonald should be one of the first authors explored in this new/old way as his profundity makes him in general unattractive for post-modernist criticism.

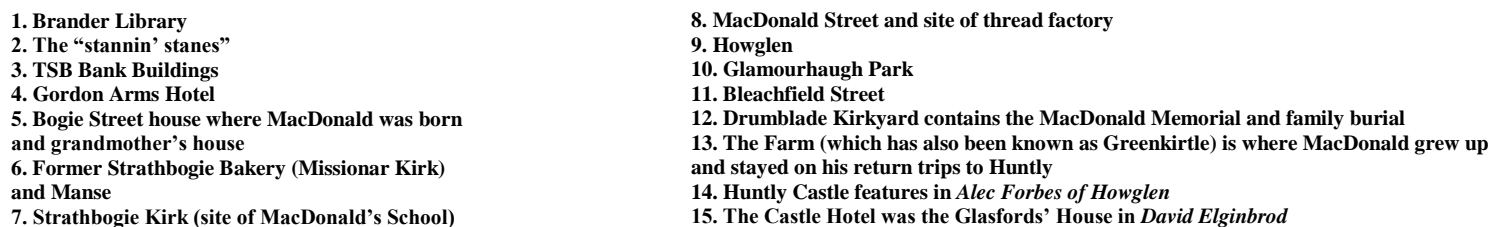
Volume 2, Nos 3-4 (1996) of *Para-Doxa* is a special number on Censorship in Children's Literature. This will be reviewed in *North Wind*. Re-writes are one of the most blatant forms of censorship, and MacDonald's children's stories have suffered very badly in this respect.

### **new research projects**

We have learned of one new research project. Catherine Persyn, at the English Language Department of the Universite de Toulouse Le Miral is studying MacDonald with a particular interest in *At the Back of the North Wind*, which she intends to translate into French.

### **new distributors**

Our member Gordon Read's fine MacDonald anthology *The Wind From the Stars* is now on the list of the theological publishers T & T Clark of Edinburgh, not Harper Collins as before. Our member Glenn Sadler's collection of MacDonald letters *An Expression of Character* is now available from the author at Howglen Fm, R.R.3, Box 23 Catawissa PA 17820 for \$13.50 inc.



**MAP OF HUNTLY** Reproduced with kind permission from the MacDonald Town Trail leaflet

## CENTENARIES IN 1998

Most readers are probably aware of two centenaries in 1998 which will be extremely important for increasing popular awareness of MacDonald. One is the centenary of the birth of C.S. Lewis, the other that of the death of Lewis Carroll. By an interesting coincidence, both were bachelor Oxford dons who are particularly well known for their writing for children. Many important writers have been powerfully influenced by George MacDonald, but no others, even John Ruskin, to anything like the extent of these two. Moreover they are both exceptionally popular authors, so there will be widespread celebration of the centenaries. Lewis repeatedly emphasised that he regarded MacDonald as his 'master'. The perpetual, friendly 'war' between MacDonald and Carroll, by contrast, was a private one, although it lies only just below the surface in their 'fantasy' stories...

MacDonald enthusiasts may be asked for help with some Lewis celebrations. In general, however, it will be up to us to attempt to ensure that MacDonald receives his proper acknowledgement during these celebrations. **It is very important indeed that MacDonald is properly acknowledged at these events. and NOW is the time to find out what is being planned. Please let us know what YOU plan to do** because your plans may suggest further possibilities to other members. We will always be happy to offer suggestions and advice, but of course it is local members who will best know what approach is most likely to succeed in their own areas.

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### Temporary change of officers

1. Because of Tim Braithwaite's extended absence from Britain on business, please, for the time being, send all material for *Orts* to 9 Medway Drive, FOREST ROW, RH 18 5NU.
2. Because of J. J. Flynn's illness, mentioned above, Debbie Johannesen has taken over as N. American Representative of the MacDonald Society. Her address, as you doubtless know, is PO Box 24, Whitethorn, CA 95589.
3. There is a guest editor this year for *North Wind* Prof. Gutteridge, who teaches in Canada, will be commissioning articles for *North Wind* 16.

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The similarity in title between MacDonald's *Phantastes* and Ludwig Tieck's *Phantasus* has frequently been noted, but MacDonald may also have been thinking of a fairy tale by Sara Coleridge. The following short piece by William Webb was first published some fifteen years ago.



## 'A DEEP SLOW MELODY OF FORMER DAYS': SARA COLERIDGE'S FAIRY TALE OF 1837

The fairy tale written by Coleridge's daughter Sara (1802-52) is not well known, since after the first appearance in 1837 it has only been reprinted once (in mid-Victorian times). It is a long work entitled *Phantasmion*, and readers may like to hear something of its qualities.

It makes one reflect on the amount of learning girls could acquire in the nineteenth century, if they were really determined to do so. I have recently come across the life of a Miss Smith who lived in Bath about 1800 and was a great prodigy. As well as the main European languages she also learned Hebrew—the latter entirely by her own efforts. Sara Coleridge specialised in Latin, and published a translation of a very long Latin work when quite young. Her brother Hartley warned her that too much Latin might spoil her chances of marriage. But he was wrong, for in due course she married a Coleridge cousin.

The study of Latin has some connection with *Phantasmion*, for Sara's vocabulary was large and often Latin-derived (as was Dr Johnson's). A modern child would find the tale difficult and far from amusing; but it has been rightly praised for its style. Some readers have seen Northern influence in the landscapes described, but I think this is rather doubtful—there are lakes and mountains and storms, also some sea scenery, but it probably owes as much to Ossianic influence as to Cumbria.

There are a remarkable number of five-stress 'blank verse lines' in the narrative, which is usually regarded as a bad feature of prose writing. When one finds half a dozen or so on almost every page—such as:

The pleasures of a dear though transient home . . . .  
Still the breeze lingered round Phantasmion . . . .  
A deep slow melody of former days . . . .  
Our dwelling will be far beyond the clouds . . . .  
His eyes appearing fixed on vacancy . . . .  
His lute is sounding from that gloomy cell . . . . (11)

one wonders if the story was first written as a poem, and these are 'fossils' from its former state; but there seems no other evidence for this. It may merely be that Sara was a half-developed poet. There are many lyrics scattered through the book where she shows a poetic gift, though not of very striking quality.

The story tells the adventures of a Prince, Phantasmion, who has to fight various enemies and perform certain tasks, aided by his own protecting fairy, Potentilla. I wonder if Sara had a particular liking for insects, for they often occur, and not with any feeling of disgust. The hero is sometimes given magical insect qualities by Potentilla—for instance, at one time he has supernatural jumping power: he becomes a flea, though the actual word is not used!

If any of the tireless biographers of nineteenth century literary figures are going to give us another study of Sara (the last was *Coleridge Fille* by E. L. Griggs, 1940, as far as I am aware)\*,

perhaps they will print longer extracts from *Phantasmion* as well. I am sure this would interest many readers who might not want the work as a whole, even if it were in print.

\*A new biography of Sara Coleridge *has* appeared in America, but it is not really helpful on *Phantasmion*.

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### MIKE PARTRIDGE'S WWW SITE AND EMAIL LIST

Since the appearance of the last *Orts* our member Mike Partridge has established a daily e-mail MacDonald digest of communications received. This currently runs to some 30 pages a week and has some hundred subscribers, of whom as many as a third seem to be active contributors!

Mike's web page, established last summer and regularly updated, provides basic information about MacDonald under five headings:

1. Selection of quotes by and about MacDonald.
2. Introduction—articles on MacDonald and on his relation to other literary figures, including a MacDonald sermon, his essay "The Fantastic Imagination", essays by MacDonald scholars, etc.
3. Recommended reading—a personal selection by Mike.
4. List of works of MacDonald available on the internet—currently fourteen e-texts covering eight of his mythopoeic works, presumably abridged in most cases.
5. Links to other web pages—direct links to other web pages carrying material on MacDonald or MacDonald-related authors. Gives rapid access to more sites than can be found using any of the standard search programmes.
6. The list of subscribers to the email digest.

The email digest is wonderfully eclectic at present. Initially I felt that those who desire to distort MacDonald to fit their own fundamentalist view of Christianity will probably soon leave and establish their own email digests, where they will not be obliged to contemplate the possibility that his world-view is more profound than their own. Then I realised that the name of the contributor of nearly all the essentially fundamentalist communications is an overt pun on his attitude towards other contributors less holy than himself. He seems, in fact, to be the modern equivalent of those imaginary characters who used to contribute so much to the correspondence columns of some literary journals. Whoever has created him has followed MacDonald's example. He is depicted with penetrating sympathy and not all his rhetoric is hollow. Having one or two contributors like this, real or imaginary, is a splendid incentive to other contributors to clarify their thoughts.

Some flavour of the digest may be gathered from the following summary of the contributions during the last two weeks. What is most noticeable is that when people are freed from the abstract conventions of the printed page they usually communicate far more naturally, and you can much more easily comprehend what they are trying to say. Consequently you feel far more strongly stimulated to respond than when reading a printed article, and responding is so very much easier. Initially you feel that many contributions are mere platitudes, but then you realise that, although they are statements of the obvious, in many cases they have never been enunciated

clearly before! Another striking feature is the way most contributors are willing and able to express their personal difficulties with MacDonald and ask for help.

It would be absurdly pedantic and artificial to respond to these contributions impersonally, as one would be expected to do if they appeared in a journal. So the following comments are my subjective responses. The full archives are available to anyone at [http://ds.dial.pipex.com/partridge/md\\_elist.htm](http://ds.dial.pipex.com/partridge/md_elist.htm), but one or two contributors express the feeling that they can respond freely because it is 'a private list', so I avoid mentioning names except where I am certain no offence will be caused by doing so.

The principal topics covered during the fortnight have been, *At the Back of the North Wind*, which is the 'book of the month', and the validity of MacDonald rewrites. There has also been some late comment on the previous book of the month, *Lilith*; a few miscellaneous queries; and, inevitably, the hoary old subject of MacDonald's attitude to the Atonement.

The pages begin at a high point with a comment on *Lilith*: '... G.M.'s attraction is in the fact that he was not afraid to enter into dangerous ideas and explore them for what they were worth ...' This is as fine a key as I can imagine to a book where no thought is unthinkable, no image unimaginable: Another point made by this contributor is that MacDonald's 'mixture of the old and the new is part of his attraction.' Many people mix the old and the new, of course, but there are conventions in these things, and MacDonald's mixings are always wholly unconventional. I caught the tail-end of a discussion on the uniqueness of the Shadow in *Lilith*, but it was unintelligible without the rest of the discussion.

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Predictability the issue of re-writes of MacDonald has produced a swarm of fallacious arguments from their supporters, strengthening the assumption of one contributor 'that while the stated purpose is to introduce MacDonald to those who lack the language skills to assimilate him [whoever they are supposed to be], the effect is to substantively change what is being read into a reflection that is more to our liking'. Mike Partridge expands on this: '... I prefer to read what MacDonald actually chose to say to his readers rather than what some editor (no matter how careful or judicious) thinks he should have said or what we want to hear.' He goes on to acknowledge 'that there are many people who pick up the edited versions who would never dream of moving on to the originals which, rightly or wrongly, are perceived as being difficult.' Many of these people are tempted by garish covers and mawkish titles, and one could uncharitably comment that they deserve what they get! But the crucial point is that the perception that the uncensored versions are 'difficult' has primarily been generated as a sales gimmick by those who market the re-writes.

I was surprised to find contributors taking seriously the utterly fallacious argument that 'time and/or the limitations of education render [reading of the originals] impossible' for many people. Nevertheless these limitations do apply in a few special situations. Not many young children today could read an adult Victorian novel like *Sir Gibbie*, and Kathryn Lindskoog describes how she carefully adapted it for this class of reader. Even the argument about time is not a complete red herring, since the dialect passages in the Scottish novels cannot be read rapidly. But

otherwise the reading speed of an attentive reader depends upon the clarity of a work, not upon its length, and the prose of MacDonald's novels is superior to that of the rewrites. And as far as I am concerned the delightful passages of Doric dialect perform a useful function in slowing me down when I am tempted to read too rapidly!

The point is made that although it is difficult to prove that the publishers of the re-writes 'were making changes for the specific purpose of marketing the books as entertainments, they have in fact been more successful in doing so than in getting the very real and legitimate audience who might profit from MacDonald's works . . .' Demonstrating how the re-writes remove all MacDonald's deeper meaning will involve a lot of time which could be more profitably spent trying to understand MacDonald better. An article in *VII* on abridgements of *David Elginbrod* and *Paul Faber* referred to by one contributor does not explore the problem in any depth, even though Kathy Triggs has analysed Paul Faber in depth in *North Wind*. However I hope soon to analyse *Weighed and Wanting* and its re-write/s.

Another argument which is raised is that the re-writes are no different in principle from MacDonald's rewrites of his own and other people's books!!! He followed the conventions of the period and usually published a work initially in serial form and/or as a lightly edited 'three-decker'. Then he carried out the rigorous cutting necessary to condense it into its final form as a one-volume work only after gauging the initial public response. When he re-wrote works for any reason other than this they usually do resemble the modern re-writes in one important particular—they are much worse than the originals! This is most obvious with his poetry, and would seem to indicate that with him it was the initial inspiration which came most directly from God.

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MacDonald is a master of irony, but no statement of his about the Atonement appears to contain any irony. His carefully succinct denunciation of what was, and in some quarters still is, the conventional interpretation is quoted from *The Hope of the Gospel*:

Very different are the good news Jesus brings us from certain prevalent representations of the gospel, founded on the pagan notion that suffering is an offset for sin, and culminating in the vile assertion that the suffering of an innocent man, just because he is innocent, yea perfect, is a satisfaction to the holy Father for the evil deeds of his children. As a theory concerning the atonement nothing could be worse, either intellectually, morally or spiritually; announced as the gospel itself, as the good news of the kingdom of heaven, the idea is monstrous as any Chinese dragon. Such a so-called gospel is no gospel, however accepted as God-sent by good men of a certain development. It is evil news, dwarfing, enslaving, maddening—news to the child-heart of the dreariest damnation.

The contributor who quotes this passage professes to find it uncharacteristically antagonistic, but MacDonald routinely savages false 'Christian' preaching in his novels. Several contributors disagree with MacDonald on this matter. Surprisingly, no contributor is prepared to express outright agreement. Yet I would go so far as to suggest that it so clearly reflects the core of

MacDonald's thought that anyone who likes MacDonald but cannot accept it is probably misunderstanding all he wrote, although obviously the converse does not apply!

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I have not seen most of the discussion on *At the Back of the North Wind*. I was surprised to find several contributors equating North Wind merely with Death. She could not have taught Diamond so much in this aspect only. As one contributor expresses the matter with quite excessive caution: 'Diamond's first experience with North Wind could have been intended to trigger something "saintly" in the spirit of Diamond, just like a near death illness triggers a change in many adult lives.' Mr Vane's for example! Some contributors understandably experience difficulty with Diamond's preternatural goodness. Yet his is as nothing compared with Clare Skymmer's in *A Rough Shaking*, which nevertheless inspired a Booker-Prize-winning novel! Actually MacDonald's approach is far less absurd and vastly more worth-while than the opposite convention which one meets in crime novels and plays: that murders are an everyday occurrence for many people wholly unconnected with law enforcement! A few contributors express puzzlement at how Diamond seems 'somehow supernaturally protected from the elements.' But poor children who survived in Victorian London must have possessed far more resilience than modern urban Americans, and, as was quickly pointed out, most of Diamond's adventures occur in dream/visionary circumstances. Also puzzling to some are 'the (nonsense?) verses/rhymes [which] go on for much too long and don't seem to benefit the story line in [any] clear way.' But this elicited the rapid response that 'they are the child in Diamond coming to the surface, so if you don't read them, this may be why you can't see him as a real child.' More than this, I would suggest that, as elsewhere, MacDonald is hinting that there are spiritual paths available to the innocent child which are unlawful for an adult—specifically in this case the use of mantra. The 'world of the land at the back of the North Wind seems unreal to' one contributor, but I suspect this is because he has not followed up MacDonald's allusion to the way it is described in one of the most beautiful of all Scottish poems—Hogg's "Kilmenney".

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A much more general question raised was what does the person do who has joyously read all MacDonald wrote? The contributor had clearly undertaken his initial reading of MacDonald in the right way, plunging in and allowing MacDonald to 'pour out God's character so gloriously all over . . . heart and soul.' He realised that he must read 'all his books over again', but the responses do not address this aspect, they only make good suggestions about other authors such as Charles Williams and G.K. Chesterton. Yet it is crucial to MacDonald's intention (as CS Lewis recognises in his letters to Arthur Greeves) that, strengthened by the joy of the first reading, people should return to the books to follow up the hints of more difficult ideas liberally scattered through them.

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All this has come out in just two weeks! And it is merely a selection made from one personal viewpoint. Another commentator would probably produce a wholly different and equally valid report. A pendant could claim there is little sign of the solid facts one looks for in good scholarly papers, but this misses the point. Conventional literary journals are likely to remain the most

suitable place for presenting such 'solid facts' for a long time to come, despite some of their conventions being out of date. Mike Partridge's e-list has the quite different primary purpose of helping and encouraging people to look at MacDonald in ways entirely new to them. (It is the antithesis of a fanzine, which seeks to confirm people in their comfortable settled opinions.)

Only now am I reminded that this is issue number 42 of *Orts*. MacDonald's friend Carroll placed enormous importance upon the number 42 as marking major turning points in the growth of an individual or an institution (apparently partly because of the way it is used in the bible, and partly because of MacDonald's emphasis upon 21 in *Phantastes*). How imminent is the death knell for newsletters like *Orts*? Do we already hear, from far across the lake, the call: 'Come in number 42, your time is up'?

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